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Preserving the Memory: Reflections On A Year of Public History Seminars

Beginning in the spring of 2002, I have had the honor of leading an ongoing series of seminars for NPS colleagues designed to think together about the enduring challenge of public history. Professor James O. Horton--who helped direct the seminar at Hampton National Historic Site in July 2003--characterizes public history as "history without a net," and those of us with roots in the culture of academia but active lives working with public history colleagues appreciate both the promise, challenge, and seemingly intractable dilemmas faced by NPS in its role of being, as one seminar participant put it, the "gatekeepers" of cherished sites and stories.

It would take a longer essay to describe each seminar in detail, so here I will think about some enduring themes and issues sparked by the seminars. First, briefly, some comments about the creation of the seminars. On January 31, 2002, Marie Rust, director of the Northeast Region, called together a planning group made up of John Maounis, Gay Vietzke, Bob McIntosh, Nora Mitchell, Rolf Diamant, Laura Soulliere, Tony Knapp, Maria Burks, Cindy McLeod, and B.J. Dunn to think with me about seminar structure.

We decided that seminars would be three days in length, and they would be held at NPS sites around the country. The first two days would be conversations about some of the dramatic case studies I have had the opportunity to write about: changing interpretations at NPS battlefield sites, the making of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Enola Gay controversy at the National Air and Space Museum, and the cultural afterlife of the Oklahoma City bombing. The third day would focus on interpretive challenges at our meeting site, and local staff would be responsible for the presentation. Participants were expected to complete a set of readings before the seminar began, and were also expected to keep a notebook during the seminar, which I would subsequently read and return with comments. Not everyone has kept this part of the participant agreement, but I have ready many thoughtful and articulate notebooks. I continue to believe that writing introduces a discipline into what otherwise remains just "good talk," which is not enough. Writing—even if only for a few minutes at the end of each seminar session—demands conceptual ordering, and necessitates a struggle with language in ways that speech does not. It also allows, for those who take advantage of it, a written record of the seminar's activities.

As of fall 2003, seminars have been held at: Valley Forge National Historical Park, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, Richmond National Battlefield Park, Independence National Historical Park, Oklahoma City National Memorial, and Hampton National Historic Site. Planning is underway for seminars in the Boston area, at Sagamore Hill National Historic Site, and at Marsh-Billings Rockefeller National Historical Site. I continue to enjoy sharing leadership of the seminars, as I did with Jim Horton at Hampton, NPS Chief Historian Dwight Pitcaithley at Richmond, and Gettysburg Superintendent John Latschar at Independence.

The seminar's course objectives are as follows:

This seminar is intended to be a conversation about the issues, dilemmas challenges that arise in the presentation of American history in public. We will begin by focusing on several case studies that reveal, for example, the tension between the commemorative and the historical voice, the ideology of place, the vexing issue of the omniscient and hidden curatorial voice, the power of artifacts, the

tension between preservation and development, the changing nature of the American historic landscape, the difference between history and heritage, history and memory, and the charge of "revisionism" in the presentation of history.

After engaging these case studies, we will turn our attention to our host site and think with them about the site-specific expressions of these issues, dilemmas and challenges.

In all the seminars, I have been reminded—but certainly not surprised—by the intense expressions of stewardship from seminar participants, and their deep and often movingly articulated desire to be responsible caretakers of their sites. And part of this responsibility, most believe, has to do with a richer, "thicker," interpretive undertaking. I continue to learn how many "cultures" exist within NPS, and have appreciated listening to discussions about what it means to be stewards of a site: is NPS there to tell "facts, facts, and nothing but the facts?" Is it there to celebrate heritage, to present complex history, to prize dominant and established narratives, to be a vehicle for multiple voices?

Some of the issues raised in the seminars seem to be "internal" NPS issues. Over and over again participants expressed frustration at the difficulty of filtering sophisticated interpretive forays through seasonal employees who do not necessarily receive the training necessary to present such material effectively. One participant thought it more important than ever—and more difficult than ever--to "find and train a staff to speak knowledgeably about multiple perspectives." Other participants asked, "What is our responsibility to the public vs. our gratitude to a person [or group] who made the preservation of a place possible?" There are places, another observed, where "others own the vision, NPS owns everything else."

These issues of symbolic ownership of "the message" and the relationship between NPS and "stakeholders" raise a host of "external" issues dealing with process and with judgment calls about interpretive issues at particular sites. One of the case studies I have used in every seminar is my chapter "Anatomy of a Controversy," in a book I co-edited with Tom Engelhardt, *History Wars: the Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*. Many participants, while troubled by the harshness of the controversy, found it useful to think how else the National Air and Space Museum might have developed a more inclusive process, and planned and responded more effectively to the controversy in its embryonic stages. Seminar members have considered this a particularly valuable case study and cautionary tale for NPS.

This issue, of course, focused participants on process, and especially in the evolving era of partnerships, the challenge of working with stakeholders who may very well envision what should be done at a site quite differently from NPS. "How," one participant asked, "do we acknowledge and respect, but when necessary, correct commemorative memory? Is NPS responsible for historicizing mythologized events?" Another participant raised an issue I had never thought about, "how does any process "take account of timid or alienated voices?"

The seminars offer the opportunity for NPS colleagues to be liberated from the tyranny of the day-to-day logistical issues at their sites and engage in disciplined and focused conversation. Ideally, everyone serves as a resource for each other. There is a virtue to problem solving sparked by close attention to the case studies and listening to the experience of colleagues who may have successfully dealt with familiar issues.

So many interpretive challenges have arisen! How should NPS deal with ethnic communities who want not only to be included, but also want to own—or at least share--the means of representation, to tell their own story at NPS sites? How successful is the highly visible and highly contested transformation in telling the story of the Civil War and Reconstruction? How, given the emotional attachment of Cold War veterans to Nike and Minuteman sites, will NPS tell the story of the Cold War at these sites? How should slave stories and quarters be interpreted, especially if documentation is not readily available?

One of the participants at Hampton, noting that some visitors to sites of former plantations ask to see the hanging tree, and grow suspicious when told—as they are at Hampton—that there is no evidence of one, insightfully observed, "perhaps that visitor is asking to hear about how slaves were treated so there is an opening to tell stories of beatings and runaways, etc." One participant, reflecting, I think, a majority opinion in the seminars, wrote in her journal, "NPS works for the public and should absolutely be the aggressors when trying to preserve public memory (more comprehensive memory) especially when various groups oppose….It's about serving the public and contributing to more comprehensive history for an even wider public."

The seminar in Oklahoma City was a most unusual and moving event. In early May, 2003, approximately 25 members of the Flight 93 Memorial Task Force—including a number of family members of those killed—joined me at the Oklahoma City National Memorial where we met with many of those involved in the creation of the memorial, including family members and survivors. We toured the archive, spent time at the outdoor memorial and in the memorial center exhibition, and met with the designers of the memorial. The discussions were honest, intense, direct, and extremely helpful. I will never forget a wonderful compliment offered to me by a Flight 93 family member about the people she had met in Oklahoma City. "I understand," she said, "why you love these people so much."

I look forward to continuing what has become a long and rewarding relationship with NPS, and I especially look forward to the rich discussions about and evaluations of important interpretive issues that have made these seminars so fascinating. To all who have contributed through your participation, a hearty thank you!